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Aix-en-Provence, Publication de l'Université de Provence, 2003, 282 pp.,
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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/chs/324>
DOI: 10.4000/chs.324
ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2005
Number of pages: 141-143
ISBN: 978-2-600-01054-2
ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Juergen Martschukat, "Régis Bertrand & Anne Carol (eds.), *L'exécution capitale : une mort donnée en spectacle – XVI^e-XX^e siècles*", *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 9, n°2 | 2005, Online since 11 February 2009, connection on 23 March 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/324> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.324>

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- 1 In recent years, the death penalty has drawn increasing attention from historians. Capital punishment has been analysed not only as subject of legal history in the strict sense of the term, but from multiple historiographic perspectives with far-reaching implications. Inspired by the debates on the scope of social and cultural history, historians have scrutinized the death penalty as institution, incident, and ritual in the context of social systems, discourses, and symbolic practices in specific times and places. Thus, the death penalty and its execution serve as a clue to the history and changes of states, cultures, societies, their self-definitions and their identities.
- 2 The collection of essays to be discussed here on «L'exécution capitale: une mort donnée en spectacle», is inspired by these historiographic reformulations. Composed by Régis Bertrand and Anne Carol and published in 2003, the book gives an overview of the history of the death penalty and the state of the related historiographic research mostly in France between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries, but the book also refers to the histories of Italy, Portugal, and Spain. As Bertrand and Carol stress in their introduction, the execution of a death penalty is to be understood not only as punitive act, but also as social performance and as an act interwoven into historically

specific patterns of thought and action, and power and rule. The editors emphasize as one of the major premises of the book that capital punishment has never been as solid as it might have appeared at certain moments in history, but it has always been unstable, highly fragile, and a locus of historic conflicts. According to this premise, the various chapters focus on the interstices and inconsistencies in the history of the death penalty. The first major part of the book deals in six chapters with the condemned and his body, whereas the second major part focuses in five chapters on the execution between spectacle and edification. A third major part of the book is dedicated to the artistic representation of the death penalty, elaborating on the Italian opera (Martine Lapiéd), and European painting (Martine Vasselin, Claude Jasmin), with specifically intriguing insights into the representation of martyrdom in the centre of artistic compositions.

- 3 In the first part of the volume, dedicated to the «statut et traitement du condamné,» different execution procedures, their effects on the condemned, and their interdependence with changing notions of humanitarian and cultural progress are of central concern. Topics of the various chapters are the conflictive relation between the rapidity of the whole judicial procedure on the one hand, and of the execution itself on the other hand (Jean-Michel Bessette), or the insecurity of death and the reanimation of human beings (Claudia Milanese), or how the handling of dead bodies changed over the centuries (Régis Bertrand). Whereas in early modern times punishment could possibly even last longer than life and be inflicted on the dead body, for instance through their exhibition to the public after the execution, the rationalization and medicalization of life and death since the eighteenth century and the influence of the hygiene movement made the disappearance of dead bodies from the public sphere an imperative. The mechanization of the execution performance is also of crucial importance to the relation between the capital punishment system and the notion of cultural progress. Isabelle Renaudet provides a chapter on the Spanish «Garrot,» but with regard to execution technology the Guillotine takes center stage in the volume. In various chapters, it is analysed as a point of intersection of discourses and practices, where relations between executioner and executed and their roles in the punishment procedure are renegotiated and redefined, influencing the prevalent notions of society and culture (Vincent Barras). The Guillotine promised a greater control of the execution procedure to the authorities because it narrowed the leeway for both the executioner and the condemned. It highly reduced the probability of botched executions which for centuries had contributed to the transformation of a «despicable wrongdoer» into a «suffering victim» in the eyes of the public now and then. Furthermore, botched executions made the condemned suffer more than absolutely necessary, and with the advent of modern society the reformulation of the death penalty procedure was seeking to reduce both the pain caused by the execution and its effects on the public to a minimum. Though the Guillotine promised a rapid and painless execution to the contemporaries, it also stirred heated debates among medical doctors, politicians, and law experts whether the human mind was capable of conscience, feeling, and perception even after the decapitation. This would have been a nightmarish and terrifying consequence for the aspired humanity of the death penalty system and the society as a whole (Anne Carol).
- 4 The Guillotine remains of crucial importance in the second set of chapters, which deal with the execution as spectacle. The beheading machine modified the early modern spectacle of suffering (Robert A. Schneider) and transformed it into a spectacle of

rationality. The mechanization enhanced the control of the authorities over the production of meaning in the moment of execution (Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini) by both making the outcome of the performance more predictable and by withdrawing the dying of the condemned from the eyes of the observers. Though in France death penalties were publicly executed until the Weidmann case on 10 June 1939, in prior years their visibility had been reduced by and by, for instance through the supersession of the scaffold in 1870. It was this decreasing visibility and the increasing rationalization that codified an execution as a moment of legitimate violence in a modernizing, bourgeois, and humane society (Martine M'sili).

- 5 This is a fine book that provides a good overview of the death penalty history and historiography in France. It answers several questions about the relationship between capital punishment and the transformation of cultures, and raises even more interesting points. Moreover, chapters on the transformation of executions from public to private in 1939 and on the abolition of the death penalty in 1981 would have been desirable extensions of the existing scope of the project.

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